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AUTHOR Cheirrett, Peg A.; Gibbs, Bruce R.
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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the beginnings of an effort to increase the diversity of technical communication in the Pacific Northwest. An ad hoc committee of technical communicators came together for this purpose because they believe that greater diversity will help technical communicators better understand and reach audiences from a wide variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. The paper discusses the committee's purpose, why diversity is important, what diversity means to the committee, and taking technical communication to the schools. The committee is using the Society for Technical Communication International Student Technical Writing Competition as a tool for introducing technical communication as a career choice to people of color at the high school level. (Author/RS)

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Diversity in Technical Communication: A Work in Progress

Peg A. Cheirrett and Bruce R. Gibbs

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Abstract

This paper documents the beginnings of an effort to increase the diversity of technical communication in the Pacific Northwest An ad hoc committee of technical communicators came together for this purpose because they believe that greater diversity will help technical communicators better understand and reach audiences from a wide variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. The committee is using the STC International Student Technical Writing Competition as a tool for introducing technical communication as a career choice to people of color at the high school level.

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OUR PURPOSE

A group of technical communicators in the Puget Sound area came together in the spring of 1994 to collaborate on a common goal. We call our committee Diversity in Technical Communication because our goal is to increase the diversity of people in the technical communication field. We plan to do this by introducing technical communication as a career choice to people of color at the high school level.

WHY IS DIVERSITY IMPORTANT?

According to a report issued by the Hudson Institute, *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century*, women and people of color will constitute a majority of the workers entering the workplace by the year 2000. David Gergen writing in the *U.S. News & World Report* stated that, as of 1991, minorities accounted for one of every four Americans. Many U.S. corporations have realized that success in the 21st century will depend increasingly on their ability to recruit, retain, and manage a diverse workforce.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO US?

We believe that increasing the diversity of technical communicators is important for two reasons:

*Diversity will help us as technical communicators to better understand and reach our audiences, who are often from a wide variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

*By increasing the number of people of color in the field, we will be tapping a larger qualified population available for work, and not limiting ourselves to a segment of the population that is declining in proportion to the whole.

We also believe that we must pro-actively recruit people of color into the field and not expect the situation to change without intervention. As corporations, universities, and other organizations actively recruit people of color, we are competing with other professions for qualified people.

One member of our committee is an African-American student in the Technical Communication master's program at the University of Washington, who is already working in the field. He believes that people of color do not see technical communication as a career option because they have never been exposed to it. As a person of color in the field, he feels that he can help other people of color see the opportunities that technical communication offers.

We believe that high school students should be exposed to technical communication in such a way that they can see it as a possible career option for them. We would like to help create a greater awareness of technical communication such that it is discussed in school as frequently and commonly as other professionals such as business and engineering.

TAKING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION TO THE SCHOOLS

We decided to focus our efforts on the Seattle School District, which has many people of color in its high schools. To help students develop interest in technical communication, we decided to use a tool that was already in place: the STC International Student Technical Writing Competition (ISTWC.) The ISTWC provides high-school students a unique avenue for international recognition. To enter the competition, students write a paper that conveys factual technical information for a specific purpose and audience. This competition encourages students to think objectively and critically, and helps them to develop and demonstrate the skills of a technical communicator.

We are currently designing a 45-minute presentation that will introduce technical communication as a career and discuss the student competition as a vehicle for students to build technical writing skills and achieve recognition for their work. We are recruiting volunteers from the Puget Sound STC chapter, the University of Washington student STC chapter, and businesses to mentor high school students interested in the competition.

After our initial contact, one of the schools has asked the Technical Communication Department at the University of Washington to support its teachers in creating a technical writing course for its students. Another school challenged our committee to develop a workshop

specifically for teachers. We are currently collaborating with the University of Washington's Technical Communication Department on an STC Research Grant proposal to create a workshop that will help high school teachers design and teach their own technical communication curriculum.

OUR WORK CONTINUES

We call this a "work in progress" because we are not finished. In fact, we have only just begun. We hope our efforts and involvement in sharing technical communication with local high schools will continue for years to come. To keep you, our fellow technical communicators informed of our progress, it is our plan to present a follow-up paper at the 1996 International STC Conference.

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Peg Cheirrett
President
WASSER, Inc.
2005 Fifth Ave., Suite 201
Seattle, WA 98121 U.S.A
(206) 441-0707

Peg Cheirrett is founder/CEO of WASSER, Inc., a staffing company specializing in technical communication and training professionals. Cheirrett graduated from the University of Southern California with a B.A. in English. She is a senior member of the STC, a former president of the Puget Sound Chapter, and a former member of the Society nominating committee.

Bruce R. Gibbs
Graduate Student
University of Washington
Department of Technical Communication
Seattle, WA 98195

Bruce Gibbs is a graduate student at the University of Washington majoring in technical communication with a focus in interactive multimedia. While attending school, Bruce is also working at PHAMIS, Inc., developing multimedia training and marketing products. Bruce has presented several papers at the 1992 and 1994 STC International Conferences and at the 1993 and 1994 STC Region 7 Conferences.

Cynthia Krepky
Supervisor
Technical Publications
Department of Metropolitan Services
Metropolitan King County
821 Second Ave, MS 138
Seattle, WA 98104-1598

Cynthia Krepky supervises a full-service communications group in a regional water quality ad transit agency. She holds a BS and MPA from the University of Washington. As a member of STC Puget Sounds Chapter, Cynthia has served as a judge for the annual Publications, Art, and Online Competition.